To Boldly Go: Futuristic Retellings of Ancient Welsh Myths

Gabriela Steinke, University of Wolverhampton

Abstract

Myths have been retold and rewritten for centuries, indeed the longevity of myths is often attributed to their inherent reshapeability. Not until the 20th century, however, were myths frequently rewritten in a future setting rather than a past one. When, in the 21st century, the publisher Seren Books invited authors to retell the Welsh myths collected in *The Mabinogion*, some (Horatio Clare, Russell Celyn Jones, Gwyneth Lewis) chose to set their new versions in the future, although all three took a different approach. This essay proposes to investigate what happens to these myths in a process that goes beyond modernising or updating and that aims to examine present day concerns by imagining possible futures refracted through the prism of ancient tales.

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Myths have been retold and rewritten for centuries, indeed the longevity of myths is often attributed to their inherent reshapeability. Not until the twentieth century, however, when science fiction writing became popular, were myths frequently rewritten in a future setting rather than a past one. When, in the twenty-first century, Seren Books invited authors to retell the Welsh myths collected in *The Mabinigion*, some (Horatio Clare, Russell Celyn Jones, Gwyneth Lewis) chose to set their new versions in the future, although all three took a different approach. This essay proposes to investigate what happens to these myths in a process that goes beyond modernising or updating and that aims to examine present-day concerns by imagining possible futures refracted through the prism of ancient tales.

The texts collected in *The Mabinogion*, eleven stories that are found mainly in two medieval Welsh manuscripts, *The White Book of Rhydderch* (1300-1325) and *The Red Book of Hergest* (1375-1425), both of which also contain other texts, were produced by Christian monks who drew on a much older, oral tradition. *The Mabinogion* was so named and first published in an English translation by Lady Charlotte Guest between 1838 and 1845. Already by that time, then, the tales had migrated in time, in mode,

and in language. We may want to consider here what Susan Bassnet and Andre Lefevere have had to say about translation as rewriting (in the context of Translation Studies):

> Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intentions, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. (Lefevere vii)

Lady Charlotte Guest's translation, undertaken at a time when interest in ideas of nationhood and its possible roots, particularly in medieval times and tales, was widespread in literary as well as political circles, was intended to bring the ancient Welsh texts to the attention of a wider, English-speaking audience: "In her opinion, Welsh literature had an intrinsic worth, and the tales of *The Mabinogion* deserved a place on the European stage; indeed, Guest went so far as to argue that 'the Cymric nation… has strong claims to be considered the cradle of European Romance'." (Davies xxviii) She certainly succeeded in her ambition to reach English-language readers – Tennyson, for example, used her translation of 'Geraint son of Erbin' as the foundation of his poem 'Geraint and Enid' in his *Idylls of the Kings* – and since her version was in turn translated quite rapidly into German (1841) and French (1842), *The Mabinigion* became part of what was then the international canon. Lady Guest's achievement is still acknowledged today, even if modern scholars find issue with the accuracy of her work.

There have been other translations of *The Mabinogion* by Welsh scholars like Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (1949) and Sioned Davies (2007) whose translation was used by all three of the authors considered here. These scholars also claim the texts as works of literature, originating in Wales and redolent of Welsh culture as well as Welsh artistic achievement. As translations, however, they stay true to the medieval manuscripts which tell their stories rather briefly and in a style that may not immediately engage a modern readership. Medieval audiences would have listened to the tales being read aloud, with the performance element giving them a dramatic dynamic. These audiences would also have been familiar with many more branches and side stories that were hinted at but not explained in the old text. The Welsh Triads

indicate a huge store of lost tales that might have fleshed out what we find transmitted in written form, tales to which the modern reader cannot gain access. Moreover, the medieval versions downgrade the mythic elements of the tales; we still find magic and supernatural elements in them, they can be described as tales of the Marvellous, but the characters we read about are no longer gods. They are mere mortals, however endowed with superhuman powers they may be, and they operate in a recognisable medieval human society. Their origins in myth can still be discerned, and indeed many commentators refer to 'myths' when discussing particularly the so-called 'Four Branches of the Mabinogi',[1] however, the Christianisation of Welsh culture has had a much greater impact on their translation then the Christianisation of Europe had on the translation and transmission of, for instance, the myths of classical antiquity. Modern readers, therefore, may not readily recognise either the myth patterns or the attendant actantial nature of the characters, being used to reading novels, which usually develop a psychological dimension for individual characters, their motives, their thoughts, feelings and struggles, something that the sequential narration of *The Mabinogion* leaves the reader to infer.

The tales have been retold (and considerably expanded) in the High Fantasy mode, mostly with a medieval setting, by authors such as Kenneth Morris in the early and Evangeline Walton in the latter part of the twentieth century. Aspects of the tales have been reworked and re-imagined in a modern setting, often for children (Alan Garner's *Owl* Service, 1967; Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* sequence in the 1970s).[2] Future settings are a much rarer and a relatively new phenomenon.

When Seren Books commissioned 'New Stories from the Mabinogion' in the early years of the twenty-first century, their stated intention was the rejuvenation of the material through the rediscovery of its contemporary relevance along with a new attempt to disseminate both the Welsh literary tradition and contemporary Welsh writing to an English-speaking audience:

> Many of the myths are familiar in Wales, and some have filtered through into the wider British tradition, but others are little known beyond the Welsh border. In this series of New Stories from the Mabinogion, the old tales are at the heart of the new, to be enjoyed wherever they are read.
>
> Each author has chosen a story to reinvent and retell for their own reasons and in their own way: creating fresh, contemporary tales that speak to us as much of the world we know now as of times long gone.[3]

There is clearly a perception here that English literary hegemony is alive and well and needs to be challenged anew.

The authors chosen are either Welsh or honorary Welsh; they all have different relationships to Wales, the Welsh language and *The Mabinogion*. Of the three to be discussed here, Russell Celyn Jones grew up in Swansea but now lives in London; he does not speak or read Welsh. He says he found the translations he read rather dry and dull. Gwyneth Lewis (the first National Poet of Wales) writes in both Welsh and English, has known the myths since childhood and regards them as part of her cultural heritage. Horatio Clare was born in London of English and South African parentage but grew up on a hill farm on the Black Mountains. He says of his first reading of the stories: "it was like reading a spell book, half in runes, without a key. One imagined listeners in some age of dark, nodding at symbolisms and references only rare scholars might now understand" (p. 201).

Russell Celyn Jones chose to re-imagine the First Branch of the Mabinogi, 'Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed' and says he tried to write in the spaces of the tale, "to make psychological what was magical, realistic what was whimsical" (Afterword, p. 172).[4] His story is set in a dystopian near-future (twenty to thirty years hence) in which oil has run out and the weather is unpredictable. West Wales has reverted to a faux-medieval political system with a ruling aristocracy. This kind of device is not unusual in science-fiction writing: both Marion Zimmer Bradley and Anne McCaffrey, for instance, have a spaceship crash on a distant planet leading to pseudo-medieval, feudal societies in their *Darkover* and *Pern* series respectively.[5] It enables Jones to retain Pwyll's status as lord of his *cantrefs* and so write about the duties, the privileges and the frustrations of a ruler. The *Mabinogion* story has Pwyll undergo a series of trials in order to establish his fitness to rule, learning, amongst other things, to take the example of Arawn, Lord of the Otherworld. Jones writes repeatedly that his protagonist does not know how to rule (25, 95), and he does not seem to learn. This is not surprising, given the inconsistent societal model Jones sets up. On the one hand, his Pwyll is "[a] Caesar in his own cantrefs, […] more or less above the law" (92) and expected to rule, on the other hand his people are able to vote in a referendum (105). He is behaving like the modern idea of a rich, indulged, ultimately powerless and purposeless aristocrat (Jones's model for the young Pwyll was the

current Prince Harry), surrounded by servants and advisors who arrange his life for him ("He couldn't think of a single major act he'd managed on his own volition", 46), yet he manages to leave his estate on his own and meet Arawn and Gwawl, whom he kills, without any interference. He marries Rhiannon but is then powerless to prevent the rearing of their son Pryderi being taken over by unwelcome, counsellor-appointed nannies. After Pryderi's disappearance, Pwyll and Rhiannon go out every evening and weekend, just the two of them, to look for their son. This is not convincing world-building, and if a story set in the future needs one vital element, it is a believable future world.[6] In the absence of one, the characters lose purpose, they become exercises in psychological speculation without being anchored in an adequately stipulated reality. Where *The Mabinigion,* for all its brevity, makes very clear that its characters act according to certain rules and expectations, and that Pwyll in particular does the right thing according to his status and position, Jones's Pwyll acts and reacts in what seems a quite arbitrary manner, even when his encounters follow the pattern set by the older text. Unlike the old Pwyll, the modern one does not confirm the foundations of his realm, yet despite the obvious and lovingly described shortcomings of the socio-political system in which he operates, neither the validity of the system nor Pwyll's position in it are questioned. Indeed, at the very end, a continuation, even a strengthening of existing power structures is heralded with Pryderi's ascension to the leadership position when, unlike his father, he is willing and able to tell the 'common people' what to do. Pryderi inherits Dyfed at the end of the First Branch in an affirmation of the existing world order. *The Ninth Wave* has the same inheritance pattern, but nothing seems to be affirmed beyond Pwyll's uselessness against his son's greater assertiveness. No purpose becomes apparent. However well this may reflect current political circumstances, it is narratologically inconsistent, and one reason for this may be Jones' apparent reluctance, or inability, to accord the old myths any contemporary relevance.

Gwyneth Lewis chose the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi, 'Math son of Mathonwy', for her re-imagining. Her version is unmistakably a science fiction novella, set on a spaceship in orbit around Mars in the year 2210, yet of the three books it contains the most straightforward retelling of the myth while giving it the most fantastical of interpretations. The story is told entirely in direct speech, either in the form of dialogue between the two characters she invented, Campion, an Inspector of (spaceship) Wrecks and his young apprentice, Nona, or as verbal records on their

logs. The two characters have entered what they take to be an old Earth spaceship to find out what happened to the vanished crew. There is enough space technology language along with nicely judged throwaway remarks about how things were done in the 'olden days' to create a convincing, if minimal, future setting. The mythical story is introduced as a Virtual Reality (VR) game which they find – and regard as outdated technology – on the wreck. This is a rather neat device which allows Lewis to relate what happens in the myth while maintaining a running commentary through her protagonists and thus interrogating what is happening from a modern point of view. Campion has enough knowledge to recognise the storyline as Celtic myth, admitting to having read Robert Graves and Mircea Eliade in his youth, but although he knows of the Irish hero Cuchullain, he seems ignorant of the Mabinogi. Lewis has fun with some of the more arcane aspects of the story, such as Math having to keep his feet in the lap of a virgin in order to survive: "But why are you cradling the king's feet? Are his toes cold?" (41) Humour is also evident when the somewhat crusty and pedantic Campion, insisting on changing roles in the VR because he thinks he knows what information is relevant to them, ends up as the female giving birth each time Gwydion and his brother Gilfaethwy are changed into animals by Math. Campion is of the opinion that myth functions as either symbol or metaphor, and so tries to rationalise the various births in the story as representing "*the change from matrilineal inheritance to patrilineal system*", since the "*functions which previously belonged to the Goddess are taken over by men*" (104, italics in the text) – a truly Gravesian interpretation.

Campion is, however, not configured as a predominantly comical figure; he is trying very hard to maintain what he understands to be an objective and scientific attitude when faced with an inexplicable myth.[7] Both Campion and Nona are given lines that shine a critical spotlight on some of the assumptions made in the *Mabinogion*. In the Fourth Branch, Gwydion is the focal point of the story, his are the actions that are described and his skills bring the story to a more or less satisfactory conclusion.[8] There is no criticism even of Gwydion's most morally reprehensible actions, such as helping his brother rape the king's footholder, he is praised throughout for his wisdom and skills, and of course, "Gwydion was the best storyteller in the world" (Davies 48), a quality that seems to obviate the need for what modern standards would consider moral rectitude. Nona and Campion judge Gwydion much more harshly, not as a residually divine mover of events but as a man who

evades his moral responsibilities and who tries to force both people and nature to conform to his desires. The creation of Blodeuwedd, the woman made of flowers to be a wife for Lleu, thus becomes less a great act of magic than a violation of another being and indeed of nature itself in the service of Gwydion's ultimately selfish vision to provide a normal life for Lleu. Lewis, who retells the main events of the Fourth Branch quite faithfully, examines the shift that can take place in perspective and interpretation when a tale undergoes a temporal dislocation while at the same time assuming that however outlandish some of the related events and behaviours may seem, the central themes continue to touch a nerve in human beings now and in the future.

There is a certain irony in the fact that Lewis chooses to resolve the mystery in her tale (what happened to the missing spaceship crew) in a way that configures imagination as a tangible source of power, and the power of the myth, which her characters have striven so hard to understand, as a lure to ensnare not only their imagination but their bodies to provide fuel for the spaceship – a spaceship that, far from being a wreck, has travelled so far and so long that over thousands of generations humans, animals, plants, and the ship itself evolved together and merged into a completely new, now predatory entity. The myth being played out on the VR system is not to be understood metaphorically but literally. Lewis declares in the afterword that amongst other things she "wanted to look at the shadow side of the creative mind, the way in which it can consume as well as generate" (252-253). The combination of myth and science fiction in this case proved to be a fruitful platform.

Horatio Clare's novella *The Prince's Pen* takes the story of Lludd and Llefelys and sets it in an unspecified but not too distant future in which sea levels have risen, England is mostly an archipelago, drinking water is scarce and an unspecified military power (called only 'the Invaders') tries to subjugate every country on earth. Only Wales and Pakistan hold out. The story of Lludd and Llefelys tells of three plagues threatening the Island of Britain and is told in an extremely sparse manner, occupying barely five pages in the Davies translation. Clare seizes with relish the possibilities offered by the gaps in the tale although he sticks quite closely to the sequence of events. He sees contemporary relevance and parallels everywhere, which means he is trying to put rather too much into a work of this restricted length; there is, however, no denying that his way of seeing modern versions of the original plagues is interesting, even compelling.

In *The Prince's Pen* (Part One), the Welsh effectively become the Taliban fighting a guerrilla war against the overwhelming force of the Invaders. The parallels with the war in Afghanistan are obvious. Clare's narrator is one of the Welsh guerrillas, and so a far-off conflict is brought uncomfortably close to home. For all that it is set in the future, the story vividly evokes the landscapes, the speech cadences and the preoccupations and behaviour patterns of contemporary Welsh people. There are very few concessions to readers who are unfamiliar with Wales and Welsh geography, readers are simply assumed to know where the action moves from the abundant use of contemporary place names whose significance is never explained – we are expected to understand why, for instance, the destruction of Merthyr Tydfil is a major calamity. This technique echoes *The Mabinogion,* which also assumes intimate knowledge of Welsh localities, a knowledge that ironically has now been largely lost. The intensely Welsh scenario, coupled with the specifics of a local war that include shelling, drones, betrayals, torture, suicide bombings, details that are being reported from that distant war, creates a narrative tension that demands a re-evaluation, on the part of the reader, of the possible motivations of and the personal consequences for the participants in the real-life conflict. The *Mabinogion* plague of the (foreign) *Corannyeid,* who hear everything that is being said in the open, is translated into surveillance drones and computerised spying on the part of the Invaders, and the remedy, extermination of the *Corannyeid* by means of ground-up insects becomes Theo the Bug, a computer hacker who manages to disable the enemy systems. This is more than updating the old tale, it draws a direct line between the plague of the myth and modern concerns which, given the recent revelations about large-scale state-sponsored surveillance, are becoming ever more pressing and immediate.

The war against the Invaders, which reflects the first plague of the *Mabinogion* story, and which accordingly ends with victory for the Welsh (albeit at enormous cost), takes up more than half of the novella, as it does in the source tale. The others, two fighting dragons and a sorcerous giant who despoils the land, are given equally modern and weighty incarnations, too weighty, perhaps, for the space available. The two dragons become rival faiths with followers of Christianity and atheists in one camp and Muslims in the other. This recasting is made plausible through the narrative treatment but in the limited space available it cannot receive the exploration such a highly relevant and potentially incendiary topic may be considered to deserve. The third plague, too, is presented as a thoroughly modern concern: the despoiling of the

land is laid at the door of shadowy individuals who belong to a class of super-rich, supported by equally shadowy corporations, media, lawyers and corrupt officials. Direct references to the 2009 banking crisis are drawn. The worst offender is revealed as the king himself. The reasons for this development remain vague. There are somewhat bland indications that power corrupts and that the opportunity for self-enrichment seduces but there is little exploration beyond that. True to the old story pattern, the king eventually sets about righting the wrongs he himself initiated and we are given to understand that he succeeded, but we are not told how. The tale has run its course, and if we are inclined to ask for more than it can give us, we should nevertheless acknowledge Clare's achievement in translating the tribulations described in 'Lludd and Llefelys', outlandish and improbably as they may now appear, into all-too-probable twenty-first century plagues, addressing issues of immediate concern to modern readers.

There is a recognisable migration of the old tales into new forms and times in the three texts discussed. A future setting generally facilitates the retention of some of the old mythical and magical elements that might otherwise lead modern readers to dismiss the stories as entertaining but irrelevant in a society focussed on rationalism and science. Who is to say that millennia of evolution cannot result in a merging of species or that in the near future computerised killer robots will not be built and eventually destroyed by technical wizardry? The main concern of these re-writings, however, is finding the issues that still resonate with us today, whether it be coming to terms with a given role (Jones), interrogating the uses of the imagination (Lewis) or exploring the effects of oppression and war (Clare). In their various ways, all three bear witness to the power of the old myths to induce reflection on the human condition and the possibility of enhancing this experience for modern readers through a futuristic setting. Distance often facilitates a clearer view, and if the past proves too great a distance, as seems to be the case with *The Mabinogion*, an imagined future can provide a solution. If, however, the future setting is not sufficiently developed to be believable, much of the power of the myth is lost.

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[1] 'Pwyll Prince of Dyfed', 'Branwen Daughter of Llyr', 'Manawyddan Son of Llyr', 'Math Son of Mathonwy'.
[2] A useful discussion of these and other twentieth century appropriations can be found in C.W.Sullivan III, *Welsh Celtic Myth in Modern Fantasy*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1989).
[3] Penny Thomas, series editor, 'Introduction' in Russell Celyn Jones, *The Ninth Wave*, (Bridgend: Seren, 2009), pp. 6-7.
[4] This formulation may indicate that he was intent on getting rid of mythical elements as much as possible or that he does not understand old myths to have relevance today.
[5] A particularly successful treatment of this kind, which utilises Irish mythological themes and characters, can be found in Julian May's science fiction series *Saga of the Exiles* (1981-1984).
[6] The credibility gap extends beyond the problematic power structures; in a world without oil, there are still carrier bags, Boots the Chemist, Starbucks caramel frappuchino and most of the other trappings of contemporary western society, although all the factories are said to be derelict. Simply taking out the internal combustion engine and substituting horses and bicycles does not make for a new world order.
[7] Campion clearly had not come across Ursula K. Le Guin's lovely piece on 'Myth and Architype in Science Fiction' which as early as 1976 discusses the relationship between science and myth (and science fiction) with polemical humour as well as critical acumen.
[8] Even in the old story, the ending is not entirely happy, because although the proper order is restored, there is no indication that the intended hero, Lleu Llaw Gyffes, takes another wife or founds a dynasty; his rule is therefore barren.